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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 21 May 1982

THE BITTER PRACTICE

Many of the names of the Ch'an patriarchs reflect the wintry environment of the places where they practiced. Very rarely do we find them associated with the summer. Winter, symbolized by falling snow, represents the spirit of Ch'an, whereas the spirit of summer is quite different. In hot weather it is very easy to feel sleepy and dull-minded, while cold weather, especially in the mountains, is very good for meditation. To give a few examples, one master's name was "Snowy Peak", another was named "Snow Cave"; then there was "Snow Ravine", and "Snow Cliff". These Ch'an masters sought out places where there was a lot of snow.

Perhaps someone practicing on a mountain may be sitting poorly and think: "Maybe I'll take a break and stroll down the mountain for awhile." But when there is a heavy snowfall, all the roads are blocked off and if you were to venture out you may end up falling off the mountain to your death. At times like that, even if you don't want to meditate you still have to meditate. And with snow in every direction not only can't you go anywhere else but there is nothing to eat there either (with the exception of melted snow).

Once when Great Master Ou-I was practicing at Chiu-hwa Mountain there was a tremendous snowstorm. There wasn't much around to eat and having very few clothes on, his body was freezing. What did he do then? He noticed a pine tree that had a few nuts on it. After eating the nuts, he was still cold. So he made a fire with the nut shells. Then he started wondering when the snow would stop falling. The prospects didn't look very good, and the things available to eat would only keep him alive for another day at most, so he thought: "This is it for me, it's probably my fate to die here." Originally he hoped to get some food into his belly and find some more clothing to relieve the cold, but as soon as he accepted the fact that he would die, he didn't feel like eating anymore and his body no longer felt the cold. He just sat there waiting to die. Then he actually did die.

After he was dead for quite a number of days some people passed by and saw him sitting there, and said, "Hey! What are you doing here? We haven't seen you for a long time!" When he heard the sound of voices, he opened his eyes and said, "That's strange. I haven't died yet!"

Another case of bitter practice was Great Master Hsü-Yün. One time he ran into a snow blizzard on the road. He had nothing to eat and his body was sick. Then he came upon a small shack on the side of the road. It had walls, but no roof. Nevertheless, he went inside and sat down leaning against the wall where there was a little less snow. Like Master Ou-I he sat down preparing to die. The snow piled up higher and higher until he was surrounded completely by snow. But at this point he had already entered into samadhi. Several days later a beggar came by and, brushing the snow out of the way, saw there was someone sitting there. Thereupon he pulled some straw off the walls and made a fire. Then he took out a pot, melted some snow in it, and cooked up a gruel out of some millet he was carrying. When Hsü-Yün felt the sensation of heat, he came back to life. He saw somebody making porridge for him to eat. He hadn't died after all.

At the Ch'an Center we have heating in the winter, fans in the summer, and plenty of food in the refrigerator. Nobody can feel that they were about to die here. That kind of feeling would never come up in this situation. In fact, there is no example in the history of the Ch'an sect of a patriarch who practiced in such comfortable surroundings.

If every one of us takes this spirit of the patriarchs as a standard while we are practicing, we will always have a feeling of shame. We will constantly be aware that we are not practicing hard enough and that our resolve is not sufficiently firm.

Some people have to go through suffering before they can really begin to work. Without suffering they cannot get any strength from the practice. This is because pain and suffering is the thing that feels the closest to people. And the thing that is most difficult to accept is death. A person who suffers to the point where he is ready to die is very likely to get power from the practice.

spoken by Master Sheng-Yen
during retreat, July 20, 1980

NEWS ITEMS

On Sunday, May 2, the Ch'an Center celebrated the birthday of Sakyamuni Buddha and the first anniversary of the opening of the Center. Starting at 10 AM, we chanted the Heart Sutra and the 4 Great Vows, followed by the Bathing Buddha ceremony and Receiving the Blessings of the Three Jewels. Then our guest speaker, Lex Hixon, gave a short talk. At 12 PM, there was a vegetarian banquet and in the afternoon, following a Dharma lecture by Master Sheng-Yen, there were festivities which included a surprise grab bag and musical events. The celebration was well attended by children and adults of all ages.

During the week of April 12, Shih-fu Sheng-Yen paid a visit to Florida, where he lectured at Florida State University and Florida A & M University. At Florida State, he discussed plans for a student exchange program between that University and Chinese Culture University in Taiwan. Shih-fu also met with the Governor of Florida (Bob Graham) and the mayor of Tallahassee to talk over the possibilities of propagating Buddhism in Florida.

In April the following prominent monks visited the Ch'an Center:
 Dharma Master Hsing-Yün, abbot of the largest monastery in Taiwan,
 Fo Kwang Shan (Buddha Light Mountain)
 Dharma Master Cheng-I, president of the Hwa-Yen Academy in Taiwan.
 Dharma Master Chen-Hwa, president of the Fu-Yen Buddhist Academy in Taiwan.

On Sunday, May 23, at 10 PM, Shih-fu was interviewed by radio host Lex Hixon on his program "In The Spirit".

The second (and last) retreat this summer will be held from July 2-July 9. Completed applications must be received one week prior to retreat.

Other upcoming activities: All-day sitting, Sat. June 12 (starts Fri. nite 8 PM)
 Picnic, Sunday June 13. Ch'an and Daily Life Seminar, Fri. June 25, 7:30 PM through Sat. June 26, 5 PM.

Sunday is an "open house" for all visitors. The schedule of activities is as follows:

- A.M. 9:00 Meditation
- 11:00 Sutra Chanting
- 11:30 Midday Offering
- P.M. 12:00 Vegetarian Lunch (donation)
- 1:15 Dharma Lecture by Master Sheng-Yen
- 2:30 Guided Meditation
- Free instruction by Ch'an Center staff for newcomers
- 5:00 Evening Service

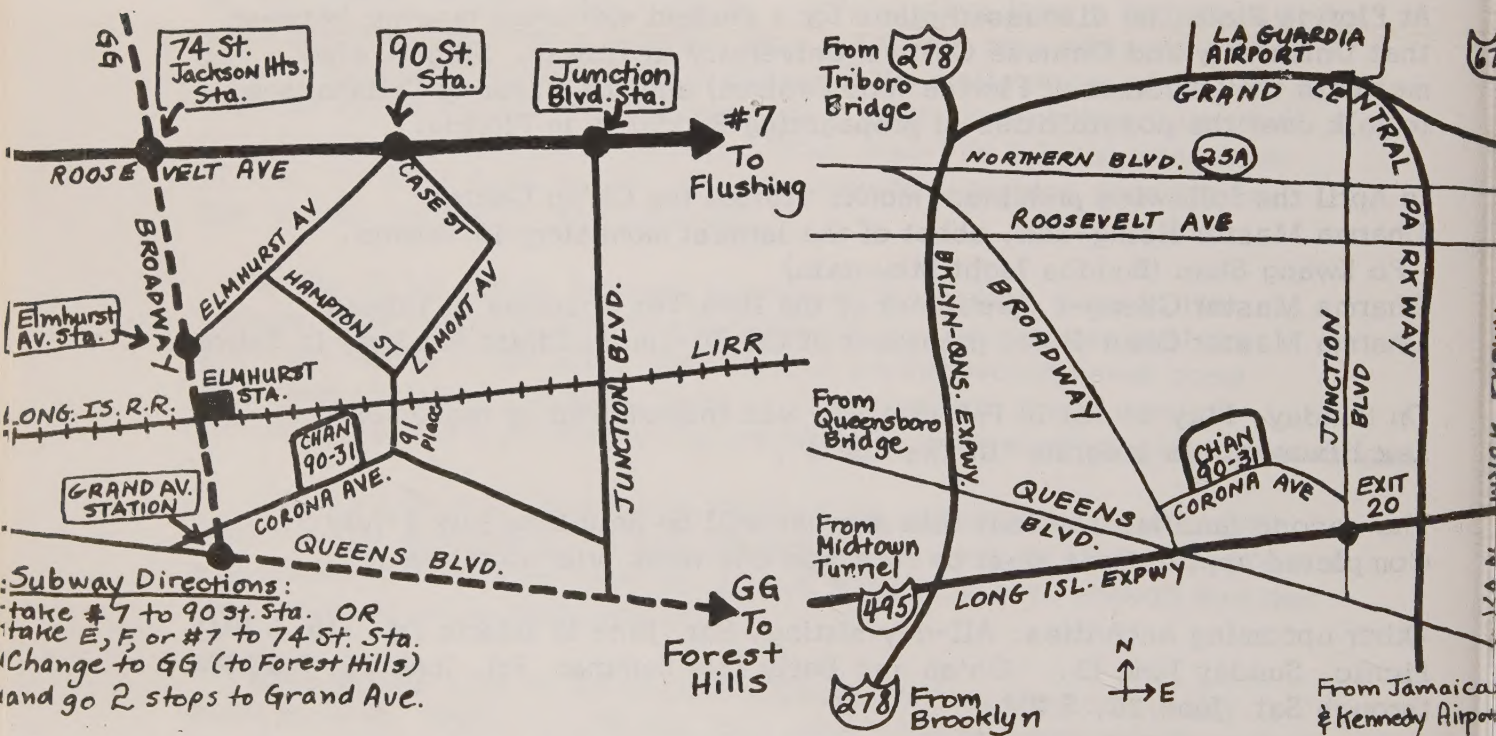
For more information on Ch'an Center activities, call or write:

Ch'an Meditation Center, 90-31 Corona Avenue, Elmhurst, NY 11373
 (212) 592-6593

*(Note: Donations to non-profit organizations can now be deducted on the IRS Federal Income Tax Short Form.)

The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.



CH'AN CENTER
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Buddhist Culture
90-31 Corona Avenue
Elmhurst, N.Y. 11373

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